DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 368 701 SP 035 133

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TITLE Dimensions of Teacher Empowerment.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Job Satisfaction; *Participative Decision Making; Problem Solving; Professional Development; Professional Isolation; *School Restructuring; Secondary School Teachers; *Self Efficacy; Status; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teaching Conditions
IDENTIFIERS Empirical Research; *Teacher Empowerment

ABSTRACT

In the spirit of educational reform, the purpose of this paper is to review the literature and present six empirically derived dimensions underlying the construct of teacher empowerment. The dimensions were obtained from a study conducted on school empowerment in nine school districts across the country from 1989 to 1992. Empowerment has been defined as the process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems. Dimensions of teacher empowerment refer to: (1) participation of teachers in critical decisions that directly affect their work; (2) teacher impact as an indicator of influencing school life; (3) teacher status concerning professional respect from colleagues; (4) autonomy or teachers' beliefs that they can control certain aspects of their work life; (5) professional development opportunities to enhance continuous learning and expand one's skills; and (6) self-efficacy, the perception of having the skills and ability to help students learn. These dimensions advance the discussion of teacher empowerment beyond mere rhetoric and provide a framework for developing strategies to help teachers become more empowered in their work lives. (Contains 20 references.) (LL)

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ED 368 701

DIMENSIONS OF TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

This paper presents six empirically-derived dimensions of teacher empowerment. Those dimensions underlying the construct include: Involvement in decision making, teacher impact, teacher status, autonomy, opportunities for professional development, and teacher self-efficacy. The dimensions advance the discussion about teacher empowerment beyond mere rhetoric.

DIMENSIONS OF TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

INTRODUCTION

Reports commissioned by foundations and legislatures, and some of the reform literature have advocated the empowerment of school staff (Frymier, 1987; Lightfoot, 1985; Maeroff, 1988). The assumption in the literature is that a positive work environment, brought about by school participants who are able to initiate and carry out new ideas, results in enhanced learning opportunities for students. In particular Maeroff (1988) cites key empowerment components for teachers to be increased status, highly developed knowledge base, and autonomy in decision making.

PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF TEACHERS' WORK

Problematic aspects of teachers' work have been noted in much of the literature on teaching. Some of these problems have their roots in the historical development of the teaching profession, and others are a result of the bureaucratic structure of schools.

Teachers are isolated in most school settings, and the work of teachers is rarely collegial in most typical schools (Little, 1982). According to Susan Rosenholtz (1985) this professional isolation is the greatest impediment to learning to teach. Experienced teachers are also isolated from each other and from those in authority (Zielinski & Hoy, 1983). Exemplary role models are not accessible so that teachers are inhibited from assisting one another. Thus, they must rely on their own abilities to detect problems and discern solutions. The consequence is that they tend to fall back on models they recall from their own student days. The isolation that results from teachers working alone results in competition, feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, and discourages sharing

information. The lack of social interaction keeps teachers from helping others and seeking help from colleagues and from getting valuable feedback. This interaction also is the medium by which recognition could be given and received (Sergiovanni, 1991).

Isolation also can, according to Ashton and Webb (1986), promote the need to conform to prevailing norms and to avoid questioning the assumptions on which those norms are based. When individuals must accept their own lack of power, something vital is missing from the work place. Lost are the creativity, commitment, and energy that teachers could contribute to the school organization (Frase & Sorenson, 1992). Many agree that the interaction among personnel in schools is necessary for promoting and institutionalizing change (Sergiovanni, 1991). At the same time, researchers have noted the centrality of collegial relationships in schools identified as unusually effective and the importance of collegiality as an aspect of school climate (Anderson & Iwanicki, 1984; Little, 1982).

Finally, teachers have little say in what happens in schools outside their own classrooms. Teachers are expected to be in complete control of students, content, teaching strategies, and evaluation in the classroom, but decisions on the overall operation of the school are outside their realm of influence. Most teachers have no say in who is hired, in setting their own schedules or those of other teachers, or in selection of administrators. While collective bargaining has benefitted teachers in many ways, an additional effect has been the centralization of decision-making processes in school districts and limitation of the number of decisions made at the local school level, where individual teachers might be expect to participate (Frymier, 1986). Teachers increasingly

find themselves teaching in situations where important decisions are made by persons far removed from the actual activities of the school, decisions that limit the teachers' abilities to meet the educational needs of students and their own needs for feelings of significance and self-worth.

To summarize, the literature on teacher work life identifies three significant problems with teachers' work in traditional American schools: teachers are isolated from colleagues in most of their daily work; and teachers have not been significantly involved in many of the decisions that affect the nature of their work, particularly in decisions made outside the classroom or the school.

NATURE OF TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment has been defined as a process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems. Empowered individuals believe they have the skills and knowledge to act on a situation and improve it. Empowered schools are organizations that create opportunities for competence to be developed and displayed.

Frymier (1987, p. 9) states that "In any attempt to improve education, teachers are central." Rosenholtz (1991) suggests that "...the culture of a school changes significantly when experienced teachers stop functioning in isolation and start solving problems related to students' learning collectively." In any attempt to improve schools, attention must be given to roles in decision making and increased opportunities for meaningful, collective participation in the critical areas of activity in the organization which focus on organizational goals.

Rappaport and his colleagues have described empowerment as a construct that ties personal competencies and abilities to environments that provide opportunities for choice and autonomy in demonstrating those competencies (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Although the construct can be applied to organizations, persons, and social policies, it appears to be a procedure whereby persons gain mastery or control over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community (Katz, 1984; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

Maton and Rappaport (1984), in a study of a large number of individuals in a religious community, found that a sense of community and commitment related to empowerment. Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988), studying large numbers of college students and community residents who were participating in various community organizations, found a consistent dimension of empowerment. This dimension (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988) was described as "a sense of civic duty, political efficacy, and perceived personal competence and was negatively related to alienation and positively related to willingness to be a leader" (p. 136).

Dunst (1991) has suggested that empowerment consists of two issues: (1) enabling experiences, provided within an organization that fosters autonomy, choice, control, and responsibility, which 2) allow the individual to display existing competencies as well as learn new competencies that support and strengthen functioning.

School restructuring has, as one of its components, the empowerment of teachers, administrators, and students (Murphy & Evertson, 1990; Short et al, 1991). In fact, the restructuring paradigm of Murphy and Evertson includes empowerment as a integral part

of reform. Lortie (1975) depicts teachers as working in isolation from other teachers. Little collegial contact is ever realized as teachers perform their craft in separate rooms. In addition to working in isolation, teachers are expected to complete reports and maintain orderly classrooms. These "around the clock" tasks tend to absorb available time for collegial interaction and contribute to the isolation of teachers.

Research by Gruber and Trickett (1987) conducted in an alternative school identified the importance of control over decision making in empowering participants in school organizations. Rinehart and Short (1991), in a study of empowerment of teacher leaders in the national program called Reading Recovery, found that teacher leaders saw opportunities for decision making, control over their daily schedule, high level of teaching competency, and opportunities for growth and development, as empowering aspects of their work.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to present an empirically-derived set of dimensions of teacher empowerment in order to broaden the dialogue and move the debate beyond the rhetoric of empowerment. These dimensions were derived from my research in the "The Empowered School District Project," conducted on school empowerment in nine school districts across the country from 1989 to 1992.

Six Dimensions of Teacher Empowerment

What I have learned about teacher empowerment is that it is a complex construct. While empowerment generally is associated with site-based management and shared decision making, my research discovered that the underlying dimensions of the construct

are varied and informative. The six dimensions of teacher empowerment found in my study include the following: Involvement in decision making, teacher impact, teacher status, autonomy, opportunities for professional development, and teacher self-efficacy.

Decision Making

This dimensions of empowerment relates to the participation of teachers in critical decisions that directly affect their work. In many cases, this means participation in and responsibility for decisions involving budgets, teacher selection, scheduling, curriculum, and other programmatic areas. Providing teachers with a significant role in school decision making is a key element in empowerment. Teachers gain the opportunity to increase control over their work environment. However, for teacher involvement in decision making to happen, teachers must believe that their involvement is genuine and that their opinion has critical impact in the outcome of the decision (Short & Greer, 1989).

The kind of school climate that encourages involvement in decision making is characterized by openness and risk taking. This environment encourages teachers to try new ideas and approaches. However, it should be noted that teachers were less willing to participate in decision making if they perceived that their principals sought their opinions but went on to make the final decision rather than allowing teachers that opportunity (Short, Miller-Wood, & Johnson, 1991). Ashton and Webb (1986) found that teachers expressed dismay and frustration over their inability to influence the process of decision making. They felt that they were not consulted and were made to feel that they could not make good decisions. In contrast, being given the final responsibility to make decisions confirms to teachers that they have good ideas and are trusted to make good

decisions (Short et al., 1991).

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of shared decision making in schools is the improved quality of the problem-solving capacity of teachers. Decisions become conscious, well-reasoned choices (Rosenholtz, 1985). The dialogue that ensures in shared decision making focused on evaluative insights about the overall quality of the school instructional program creates a tremendous opportunity for a school to grow, change, and become more effective. Teachers feel ownership and commitment to the process (Rosenholtz, 1985).

Smylie (1992) believes that the more teachers perceive that they are responsible for student learning, the more strongly they perceive that they should be held accountable for their work. In addition, this perception leads to a greater interest and willingness to participate in decision making.

A word of warning. Increasing the level of teacher participation in decision making can create a perception of a less positive school climate. This may be attributed to the opportunities for conflict when involvement increases. Conflict ensures when disclosure of varying ideologies and perceptions of teachers occurs. Also, as teachers feel more empowered, they recognize that they have the power to identify problems, institute change efforts, and ultimately, to take responsibility for solving the problem. In other words, empowered teachers are more willing to take ownership of problems and to find solutions than teachers omitted from involvement in decision making. Teachers involved in decision making in schools assume the role of problem finder and problem solver (Short et al., 1991).

Professional Growth

As a dimension of empowerment, professional growth refers to teachers' perceptions that the school in which they work provides them with opportunities to grow and develop professionally, to learn continuously, and to expand one's own skills through the work life of the school.

Glenn (1990) suggests that the real power behind the concept of empowerment is authority derived from command of the subject matter and essential teaching skills. Maeroff (1988) believes that helping teachers become more knowledgeable about teaching and assisting them in developing a repertoire of strategies to teach is requisite for empowering teachers. According to Firestone (1993), efforts to professionalize teachers (empower) builds teacher commitment and improves instruction through increased teacher skill.

Status

Status as a dimensions of empowerment refers to teacher perceptions that they have professional respect and admiration from colleagues. In addition, teachers believe that they have colleague support. Teachers also feel that others respect their knowledge and expertise.

Lortie (1975) states that "the economic realities of teaching play an important role in its nature; they undergird its social position and the shape of careers within the occupation" (p. 8). Maeroff (1988) claims that the meager salaries and other disenfranchising circumstances of teaching causes teachers not to respect themselves. Teachers worry that their status claims are being further eroded by the public's declining

faith in education in general. In addition, teachers face growing questions about their own competence from the public. The combination of high public expectations and poor working conditions, as perceived by teachers, creates the tension that erodes what little status teachers now enjoy. Poor facilities, heavy paperwork unrelated to instruction, interference with teacher time, low opinions and conflict with the community and boards of education, inadequate parental support, and being involved in daily activities unrelated to teaching (bus and cafeteria duty, etc.) enhance teachers' feeling of low status. Ashton and Webb (1986) also found that status is affected by the powerlessness that is characteristic of bureaucratic organizations. Teachers feel left out and unimportant in the critical decisions affecting their work life in schools.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to teachers' perceptions that they have the skills and ability to help students learn, are competent in building effective programs for students, and can effect changes in student learning. Blase (1982) states that the primary rewards in teaching result from the teacher's positive self-evaluations of performance with students in instructional, moral, and counseling terms. Self-efficacy develops as an individual acquires self-knowledge and the belief that they are personally competent and has mastered skills necessary to effect desired outcomes. Rosenholtz (1985) states that teachers' sense of self-efficacy and professional certainty relates to teachers' subsequent decisions to remain in teaching. Teacher certainty about professional abilities and skills is highly correlated to student achievement (Rosenholtz, 1985). Because teaching enjoys no professionally sanctioned goals and agreed-upon teaching techniques, teachers are

left vulnerable to self-doubt and arbitrary criticism (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Little assurance that teachers' decisions about instruction are effective or that their actions relate directly to student success feeds this sense of teachers' uncertainty about their competence.

Autonomy

Autonomy, as a dimension of empowerment, refers to teachers' beliefs that they can control certain aspects of their work life. This may be control over scheduling, curriculum, textbooks, and instructional planning. The hallmark of autonomy is the sense of freedom to make certain decisions.

Schools that create environments that support risk taking and experimentation by teachers also builds teachers' sense of autonomy. Autonomy is a necessary prerequisite for a sense of accomplishment (Firestone, 1991). In this environment, teachers shape the educational environment of the school (Lightfoot, 1986). Rosenholtz's (1987) research indicates that the traditional, bureaucratic organizational structure of schools prevents teacher autonomy and leads to teachers' defection from the profession.

Impact

Impact refers to teachers' perceptions that they have an effect and influence on school life. Ashton and Webb (1986) posit that teachers' self-esteem grows when they feel that they are doing something worthwhile, that they are doing it in a competent manner, and that they are recognized for their accomplishments. Lightfoot (1986) adds that teachers in her study of good schools grew from the respect they received from parents and community as well as the support they felt for their ideas. Teachers, as with

all adults, require challenges and support in order to grow personally and professionally.

Feedback from colleagues is important to teachers' sense that they are having an impact. Blase (1982) states that low levels of work motivation are the result of achieving outcomes with little or no reward for individual effort. The result for teachers is that they become less involved with students. Teachers believe that they do not receive the recognition that they deserve. Complaints are many, compliments were few. Teacher desire success in the classroom but find few tangible signs of accomplishments. Thus, they feel unsupported by administrators, colleagues, and community (Ashton & Webb, 1986).

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this discussion on empowerment, derived from a research base will be helpful and informative to those educators who are working to create empowering environments for school participants. An understanding of the six dimensions should provide the bases for developing strategies for helping teachers become more empowered in their work lives. It is important to note that some dimensions fall into the category of personal empowerment, others into the area of organizational empowerment. In total, they constitute a construct vital to the redesign of teachers' work life and the growth and renewal of schools as organizations. As one principal in "The Empowered School District Project" stated, "Teacher empowerment is like more feet running in the same direction. We all pull together and feel powerful in the process."

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